

TO: Senate Economic Development, Housing & General Affairs Committee
FROM: Hal Cohen, on behalf of the Vermont Adult Education and Literacy Network
DATE: April 15, 2021
RE: Follow-Up from Testimony on April 14, 2021

Thank you for the time to speak with you yesterday, and for your consideration of the Adult Education and Literacy Network request for funding. We understand that you have many requests and priorities before you, and we appreciate your thoughtful consideration. This memo is an attempt to capture some key points and answer in more detail the questions you asked. Please feel free to contact myself or Amy Shollenberger if you need any additional information or want us to come back to your committee for further discussion.

The four Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) service providers are proposing a statewide, coordinated outreach program to ensure that the entire community knows of our available services, to recruit participants who lack a high school diploma or have inadequate basic skills and to continue to provide AEL services at no cost to participants.

Our request from the state is to support this effort with an appropriation of \$2.8million for fiscal year 2022.

As I mentioned, when Jay Ramsey from the Agency of Education was speaking in the House Commerce Committee, he stated, “We don’t usually talk about adult education and literacy programs, but they serve the most vulnerable population of the state.”

Although adult basic education was specifically mentioned as an allowed expense for last year’s CRF\$, and it is also allowed under the current federal funding, adult education has not received any of the recovery funds so far. Unfortunately, this omission means that the people we serve could be left behind as we work statewide to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that 4 out of 5 people without a high school education lost their job in the last recession, and we suspect that the numbers will be similar for the pandemic’s impact on the economy.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for Vermont’s free AEL programs is higher than ever. No groups have been impacted by COVID-19 as much as our “vulnerable populations,” people living in poverty, people with disabilities and our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) community. Vermont’s AEL programs are at the front-line of recovery efforts, helping these populations with the career and college readiness skills they need to change their lives and find food and housing security, as well as hope and opportunities.

Background on Federal and State Statute and Adult Education & Literacy (AEL) Funding

Federal and Vermont state statutes *guarantee* free instruction to anyone 16 or older, not enrolled in a public high school, who does not have a high school credential or who has a credential, but has reading, writing and/or math skills below a 12th grade level. Statistically, 17% of high school graduates fall into this last category, and it is a key barrier to career, college and post-secondary readiness. It is also a key determinant in the cycle of generational under-education and low literacy.

The Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 requires that states solicit applicants to compete for Adult Education and Literacy funds (AEL). The Vermont Agency of Education receives and administers Title II funding under WIOA for AEL programs. In addition to the Federal funding, the Vermont State Administration & Legislature have a long-standing tradition of appropriating funding for AEL programs in the state budget.

Who provides AEL services, organizational structure and what is the relationship to the Vermont Agency of Education?

Four long-standing and well-established 501(C)3 non-profit organizations (CVABE, NEKLS, TTC and VAL) known as the AEL Network, are the sole providers of AEL services in Vermont. Each of the four organizations applies for and receives grant funding from the Agency to deliver AEL services on a county-by-county basis. Each provider also leverages private funding to supplement the state funds.

Each of the four non-profits has well-established, community-based learning centers spread strategically throughout the State and together we served approximately 2,000 adults and teens in each of the last two years.

The Fiscal Year 2022 Budget

The Agency of Education budget, as recommended by the Governor, for Adult Education and Literacy annual grant funding allocations (*not including the High School Completion Program, or HSCP*) for FY22 is \$4.2million (\$4,222,523). That \$4.2mill is composed of:

- \$726,000 in Federal Funds
- \$2.6 million in State General Funds
- \$873,000 in Adult Diploma Program Education Funds

This Agency of Education grant funding is awarded on a competitive funding basis every few years. The funding is distributed based on a county funding formula: <https://education.vermont.gov/documents/state-board-rules-series-2400>

As part of the State's comprehensive AEL system, the High School Completion Program (HSCP), a flexible pathway to graduation, is funded through Vermont's Education fund and is administered by the Agency of Education. AEL providers are responsible for delivering HSCP services. For FY22, the AOE and the Governor recommended a \$1.7 million HSCP budget, which is a \$1.9million cut over prior years (down from \$3.6million).

Part of our funding request to the legislature (\$1.6 million) this year, which we are calling *phase 2*, would be in addition to the Governor's \$4.2 million budget for FY22 AEL grant funding (not HSCP) - outlined above. This additional \$1.6 million will provide the necessary funding to serve an anticipated 25% increase (at a per student cost of \$3,530) in the people we serve -- Vermonters who need to improve their skills to re-enter the workforce after COVID. Now, more than ever, the people we serve will be striving for higher paying and more consistent jobs that provide food and housing security.

Phase 2 will be needed because of the outreach part of our request, or *Phase 1*: \$1.2million would support an intensive statewide, targeted outreach campaign to identify and recruit two groups of people:

- Young adults (16-19 years old) who have not succeeded in High School, especially during the COVID pandemic, and who would benefit from our High School Completion Program to get their diploma.
- Adults (age 20 and older) who may or may not have completed high school and have low literacy and may need to build college or career readiness skills in order to achieve their goals during the economic recovery.

Specifically, this outreach campaign will require hiring outreach workers within each AEL provider service area, as well as a statewide advertising campaign, targeted to the populations we serve. As I mentioned in my testimony, the folks who most need our services need broad and also very individualized outreach. They often have to be convinced that the programs are available to them at no cost, and they need support to get into the programs. That is why the combination of advertising and outreach staff is so important.

Right now, 36,000 Vermont adults lack high school credentials, and it is estimated that over 2,000 current high school age students have dropped out since the beginning of COVID. Vermont's AEL system is the primary pathway for high school credentialing for these demographics.

Thank you again for your time and consideration of our request and for all that you are doing to help Vermont gain more stable footing as we recover from the pandemic.

Contact Info:

Hal Cohen
Executive Director
Vermont Adult Learning
(802)-560-4030
hcohen@vtadullearning.org

Amy Shollenberger
amy@action-circles.com
802-793-1114